

METAMORPHOSES OF A PLATONIC THEME IN JEWISH MYSTICISM

1. KABBALAH AND NEOPLATONISM

Both the early Jewish philosophers - Philo of Alexandria and R. Shlomo ibn Gabirol, for example - and the medieval Kabbalists were acquainted with and influenced by Platonic and Neoplatonic sources.¹ However, while the medieval philosophers were much more systematic in their borrowing from Neoplatonic sources, especially via their transformations and transmissions from Arabic sources and also but more rarely from Christian sources, the Kabbalists were more sporadic and fragmentary in their appropriation of Neoplatonism. Though the emergence of Kabbalah has often been described by scholars as the synthesis of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism,² I wonder not only about the role attributed to Gnosticism in the formation of early Kabbalah, but also about the possibly exaggerated role assigned to Neoplatonism. Not that I doubt the impact of Neoplatonism, but I tend to regard the Neoplatonic elements as somewhat less formative for the early Kabbalah than what is accepted by scholars.³ We may, however, assume a gradual accumulation of Neoplatonic

1 G. Scholem, 'The Traces of ibn Gabirol in Kabbalah', *Me'assef Soferei Eretz Yisrael* (Tel-Aviv, 1960), pp. 160-78 (Hebrew); M. Idel, 'Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance', in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. L. E. Goodman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 319-52; M. Idel, 'The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance', *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. D. Cooperman (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 186-242.

2 G. Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (tr. A. Arkush, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky) (JPS and Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 269, 363; G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter Printing House, 1974), p. 45, 98.

3 See, e.g., M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 239-49, where I assume the formative role of much earlier elements found in material related to Judaism; M. Idel, 'The Image of Man above the *Sefirot*', *Daat*, vol. 4 (1980), pp. 41-55 (Hebrew), esp. pp. 54-5; M. Idel, 'Kabbalistic Material from the School of R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid', *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. 2 (1983), pp. 170-93 (Hebrew), esp. 173; M. Idel, 'The *Sefirot* above the *Sefirot*', *Tarbiz*, vol. 51 (1982), pp. 239-80 (Hebrew); Idel, 'Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism in the Middle Ages and Renaissance', pp. 338-44; E. Wolfson, 'Negative Theology and Positive Assertion in the Early Kabbalah', *Daat*, vol. 32-33 (1994), pp. V-XXII. For the existence of a scheme of supernal decades before the period when Scholem claimed that Kabbalah begun see also M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 113-18. I hope to return elsewhere to a discussion of an additional example found in late antiquity, where the concept of *aperantos* is found together with a double scheme of ten divine powers. See, meanwhile, the important discussion of Sh. Pines, *Collected Works*, vol. V (ed. W. Z. Harvey and M. Idel) (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1997), pp. 153-7 and note 22. On the presence, in a late medieval Jewish source, of a theosophical understanding of the ten *sefirot*, see

elements in some Kabbalistic circles over time, an accumulation that is dramatically increased during the Renaissance era by a renewed interest in Plato, Plotin and Neoplatonism in general.⁴

An important moment in this increase of Neoplatonism in Kabbalah may be discerned toward the last decades of the 13th century, in the writings of R. Isaac ben Abraham ibn Latif, R. Moshe de Leon, R. David ben Abraham ha-Lavan, R. Nathan ben Sa'adyah Harar and R. Isaac of Acre. Below, we shall consider a discussion found among the lost writing of the latter author, which reflects a reverberation of a Platonic theme and served as a proof-text, and perhaps more, for the formulations of some 18th-century views in Hasidism.

2. R. ISAAC OF ACRE'S STORY

Let me start with some bibliographical details regarding the provenance of the text. At some time in the 1570s, a Safedian Kabbalist, R. Elijah de Vidas composed one of the most influential books of Jewish Kabbalistic ethics: *Sefer Reshit Hokhmah*. This is a voluminous compendium of Kabbalistic ethics, intended to influence the larger public with a view to their pursuing a life of sanctity according to Kabbalistic values. Its success was immediate and astonishing: The rather voluminous book was printed, abridged, translated, and widely disseminated.⁵ De Vidas' discussions draw upon a variety of Kabbalistic and ethical sources available in 16th-century Safed, not all of them extant now. By doing so, he perhaps saved some precious excerpts from loss or oblivion, and mediated between older layers of Kabbalistic writings and the later audiences that read his book. By choosing to introduce them in his book, de Vidas not only saved them from oblivion but also conferred upon them an aura of authority. One of these fascinating pieces is the following story, preserved out of a lost book of the itinerant Kabbalist R. Isaac ben Shmuel of Acre in the late 13th century and early 14th century:

[A] Thus we learn from a story written by R. Isaac of Acre, of blessed memory, who said that one day the princess came out of the bathhouse, and one of the idle people saw her and sighed a deep sigh and said: "Who would give me my wish, that I could do with her as I like!" And the princess answered and said: "That shall come to pass in the graveyard, but not here." When he heard these words he rejoiced, for he thought that she meant for him to go to the graveyard to wait for

(cont. from previous page) E. Wolfson, 'The Theosophy of Shabbetai Donnolo, with Special Emphasis on the Doctrine of the Sefirot in *Sefer Hakhmoni*', *Jewish History*, vol. 6 (1992) = *The Frank Talmage Memorial*, vol. II, pp. 281–316; E. Wolfson, *Along the Path* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 68–9.

⁴ See in M. Idel's studies referred to in notes 1 and 3 above.

⁵ See M. Pachter, '*Sefer Reshit Hokhmah* of Rabbi Eliahu de Vidas and Its Abbreviations', *Qiriat Sefer*, vol. 47 (1972), pp. 686–710 (Hebrew); B. Sack, 'The Influence of Cordovero on the Seventeenth-Century Jewish Thought', in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. I. Twersky and B. Septimus (Cambridge, MA, 1987), pp. 365–79.

her there, and that she would come to him and he would do with her as he wished. [B] But she did not mean this, but wished to say that only there great and small, young and old, despised and honoured – all are equal, but not here, so that it is not possible that one of the masses should approach her. [C] So that man rose and went to the graveyard and sat there, and he adhered the thought of his intellect to her, and always thought of her form. And because of his great longing for her, he removed his thoughts from everything sensual, but put them continually on the form of that woman and her beauty. Day and night, all the time, he sat there in the graveyard, there he ate and drank, and there he slept, for he said to himself, “If she does not come today, she will come tomorrow.” This he did for many days, and because of his separation from the objects of sensation, and the exclusive attachment of the thought of his soul to one object and his concentration and his total longing, his soul was separated from the sensibilia and attached itself only to the intelligibilia until it was separated from all sensibilia, including that woman herself, and it was united with God. And after a short time he cast off all sensibilia and he desired only the Divine Intellect, and he became a perfect servant and holy man of God, so that his prayer was heard and his blessing was beneficial to all passers-by, so that all the merchants and horsemen and foot-soldiers who passed by came to him to receive his blessing, until his fame spread far about. [D] Thus far is the quotation as far as it concerns us. And he went on at length concerning the high spiritual level of this ascetic. And R. Isaac of Acre wrote there in his account of the deeds of the ascetics, that he who does not desire a woman is like a donkey, or even less than one, the point being that from the objects of sensation one may apprehend the worship of God.⁶

There can be no doubt that R. Isaac of Acre was interested in anecdotes concerning the lives of famous figures in Judaism and that he passionately collected them. In fact, this seems to be one of his characteristics in comparison to other early Kabbalists who were less inclined to deal with hagiography. Indeed, it seems, as Amos Goldreich has pointed out, that he composed a book dedicated to this topic, entitled *Sefer Divrei ha-Yamim* now lost.⁷

Someone haunted by historical curiosity, wishing to know when and where such a story has been committed first to writing in Hebrew literature, will face a problem establishing the time and the locale of the story. R. Isaac wandered from the Galilean town of Acre, still dominated by the crusaders, where he was a student in a yeshivah before the fall of the town in 1291 to the Mameluks, to Spain. He visited Catalonia and Castile, and perhaps, later on, also Northern Africa. This long itinerary does not help in identifying the area where he heard the story. But, as Paul Fenton has

⁶ *Sefer Reshit Hokhmah, Sha`ar ha-Ahavah*, ch. 4 (ed. H. Y. Waldman) (Jerusalem, 1984), vol. 1, p. 426; M. Pachter, ‘The Concept of Devekut in the Homiletical Ethical Writings in 16th Century Safed’, in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, MA, 1984), vol. II, p. 220; M. Pachter, ‘Traces of the Influence of R. Elijah de Vidas’s *Reshit Hockhma* upon the Writings of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye’, in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby*, ed. J. Dan and J. Hacker (Jerusalem, 1986), pp. 569–92 (Hebrew).

⁷ See R. Isaac of Acre, *Me’irat Einayim* (ed. A. Goldreich) (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1984), p. 409.

pointed out, there is a good reason to assume a Sufi background. Unfortunately, the parable was preserved only in a truncated form, as the remark of de Vidas indicates: "Thus far is the quotation as far as it concerns us and he went on at length," and our subsequent attempts to ponder on the significance of the parable depend upon what the 16th-century Safedian Kabbalist selected as relevant. A truncated quote, from a lost book, written by an errant Kabbalist, perhaps somewhere on one of the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, at some time between 1290 and 1320, these are all the reliable data we have. It is very difficult to ground his thought, which is true of the ideas of several other Kabbalists of his generation, like his older contemporary R. Abraham Abulafia.

Moreover, I assume that there is a small, though significant, interpolation in the text, a fact that may reduce its reliability. Nevertheless, it seems that the intrinsic complexity of the text on the one hand and its historical importance on the other deserve a sustained interpretative effort.

3. THE SPIRITUAL METAMORPHOSIS OF AN IDLE MAN

The main protagonist of R. Isaac's story is an idle man, who becomes an ideal man. It is the possibility of this transformation that is exemplified by the story, and I would like to follow the few indications dealing with the different processes involved in this transformation. Let me start with the starting point of the protagonist. He is described as *Yoshev Keranot*, namely someone who sits at the corner of the street, apparently doing nothing. I assume that for a Jewish audience this phrase means someone who does not study Torah, perhaps also someone who does not work. His basic characterisation is his propensity for corporeal things: his sole wish, according to the story, is to take possession of the princess's body. The princess apparently accepts the direct approach of the idle man and even agrees to meet him, but in a rather unusual place: a cemetery. It is at this place, where all human desires are terminated, that the idle man hopes that his particular desire will be fulfilled. By his blind desire, he becomes trapped into a frustrating expectation for a meeting with a princess who never arrives.

However, the process of expectation, nourished by an erotic longing, has an unexpected effect: it dramatically affects the spiritual orientation of the idle man. By thinking repeatedly about the external form of the princess, he gradually elevates from the corporeal to the spiritual. He was obsessed by the image of the princess and this obsession is the reason why she becomes the only object of his thoughts: a fixed idea. The idle man becomes, *malgré lui*, a contemplator of a form he has seen only once, and his life was changed by this short, accidental, but nevertheless fateful encounter. In other words, we may describe the idle man as an egoistic person who attempts to exploit the other, but then becomes an altruistic personality, blessing and helping others. The shift from one state to another takes place in the cemetery, a place where possession is meaningless.

We may describe the two main changes in the status of the idle man as follows: the movement in space from the town to the cemetery, namely the horizontal shift, is the trigger of a subsequent vertical shift, which leaves the corporeal entities and concentrates upon the supernal spiritual entity.

Let me document the nature and importance of this spiritual shift from other writings of R. Isaac; this approach seems to me valuable, even in the case of a story that was adopted by R. Isaac from another source, since the terminology used in the story reflects R. Isaac's characteristic style. In his better-known *Sefer Me'irat 'Einayim*, he adduces, in the name of one of his teachers, the following tradition:

From the wise man R. Nathan, may he live long, I heard... that when man leaves the vain things of this world, and constantly attaches his thought and his soul above, his soul is called by the name of that supernal level which it attained, and to which it attached itself. How is this so? If the soul of the practitioner of *hitbodedut* was able to apprehend and to commune with the Passive Intellect, it is called 'the Passive Intellect,' as if it itself were the Passive Intellect; likewise, when it ascends further and apprehends the Acquired Intellect, it becomes the Acquired Intellect; and if it merited to apprehend to the level of the Active Intellect, it itself is the Active Intellect; but if it succeeds in clinging to the Divine Intellect, then happy is its lot, for it has returned to its foundation and its source, and it is literally called the Divine Intellect, and that man shall be called a 'man of God,' that is, a divine man, creating worlds because behold "Rabba created a man"^{8,9}

Elsewhere I suggested R. Nathan was a student of Abraham Abulafia, who had in Sicily a disciple named R. Nathan ben Sa'adya Harar.¹⁰ In this quote, as in the story of the princess, we read of a spiritual ascent, through which man becomes "a man of God." In both cases *hitbodedut* and *devekut* are mentioned, although in the latter case it is difficult to determine the exact relationship between the two concepts. Likewise, the supernatural qualities of the man of God are mentioned in both passages: according to R. Nathan he is "a creator of worlds," while in the parable of the princess the saint is described as "his prayer is heard and his blessing is efficacious," and the end of the first quotation from *Sefer Me'irat 'Einayim* deals with prophecy which enables the prediction of the future. Also the resort to the words *mahashevet* and *nafsho* in similar contexts may point to a shared terminology. Thus we may assume that, inadvertently, the idle man undergoes, while in solitude, a process of initiation that makes him much more powerful than beforehand. This process includes corporeal isolation and mental concentration. To a certain extent, the idle man becomes a shaman.

An examination of the passages relating to *hitbodedut* from the writings of R. Isaac of Acre indicates that its purpose was to remove the thought

8 *BT. Sanhedrin*, fol. 65a.

9 R. Isaac of Acre, *Me'irat 'Einayim* (ed. Goldreich), p. 222.

10 *Natan ben Sa'adyah Har'ar, Le Porte della Giustizia*, a Cura di Moshe Idel (tr. M. Mottolese) (Milano: Adelphi, 2001).

process from objects of sensation, and to lift it up to the intelligibles or even to the highest levels of the world of Intellect.¹¹ The final goal of this process of ascent is to commune with God Himself, as is clear from the parable of the princess. This is also true in the quotation from R. Nathan, where *devekut* to the Divine Intellect is mentioned and we shall have more to say about the terminological details describing this process below.

The attainment of union with the divine intellect is, however, not the ultimate attainment of the former idle man. By becoming a devotee to God, the idle man becomes the centre of pilgrimage; he is visited by itinerant figures, the liminal persons who may be understood as constituting a *communitas*. In other words, by moving outside society, the recluse becomes the centre of another, mobile society. From an idle man, unable to do anything, the protagonist becomes an ideal one, omnipotent, a thaumaturge cultivated by many for his powers. Thus, the horizontal move outside society is followed by a vertical move, which invites another horizontal move, that of the others, who reintegrate the recluse into their society by becoming his disciples or people in search of his occult powers. Or, to formulate it differently: the social marginality of the protagonist in the first place – an idle man – invites the liminality of the first horizontal move which becomes the reason for the centrality of the second horizontal move.

How are these new and unexpected powers achieved: in the circle of Kabbalists to which this Kabbalist belonged, at least for a period of his career, namely, ecstatic Kabbalah *hitbodedut* was conceived to be part of a technique of concentration and indispensable for attaining an experience of attachment of the human soul to God. Moreover, according to R. Isaac of Acre, the act of *hitbodedut* may also serve as a means of drawing the Divine pleroma down into the human soul:

When man separates himself from the objects of sensation and concentrates and removes all the powers of his intellective soul from them, but gives them a powerful elevation in order to perceive Divinity, his thoughts shall draw down the abundance from above and it shall come to reside in his soul. And that which is written, "Once in each month" is to hint to the practitioner of *hitbodedut* that his withdrawal from all objects of sensation must not be absolute, but rather "half to God and half to yourselves," which is also the secret of the half-shekel, "the rich man should not add, nor the poor man subtract, from the half-a-shekel",¹² whose esoteric meaning is "half of one's soul," for shekel¹³ alludes to the soul.¹⁴

11 For R. Isaac of Acre's resort to this term as pointing to concentration of mind see M. Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 112–19.

12 Exodus 30:15.

13 The numerical equivalent of *sheqel* like *nefesh* – soul, is 430. The reference to division of the meditator's concerns between the sensory and intellective world, i.e., "half for you, half for God," is to *BT, Pesahim*, fol. 68b.

14 See Judah ben Nissim ibn Malka, *Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on the Pirkey Rabbi Eli' ezer with a Hebrew Translation and Supercommentary* by Isaac b. Samuel of Acco (ed. P. B. Fenton) (Jerusalem, 5791), p. 41.

The implication of this passage is that R. Isaac, or his source, could understand the ascent of the thought to the source of beauty during the isolation practice, as able to cause the descent of the abundance. Such a combination of spirituality and magic is found also elsewhere in R. Isaac of Acre and is part of a more comprehensive mystico-magical model recurrent in Jewish mysticism. It is this coupling of spiritual ascent with magical power that distinguishes the Platonic and some Neoplatonic descriptions of the ascent of mind to God from the Kabbalist ones, which incorporated magical effects, too. So, for example, we learn from one of the Hebrew versions of Plotin's description of the ascent on high as transmitted in the Middle Ages:

Aristotle has said: Sometimes I become self-centred and remove my body and I was as if I am a spiritual substance, without a body. And I have seen the beauty and the splendour and I become amazed and astonished. [Then] I knew that I am part of the parts of the supernal world, the perfect and the sublime and I am an active being [or animal]. When this has become certain to me, I ascended in my thought from this world to the Divine Cause [*ha-'Illah ha-'Elohit*] and I was there as if I were situated within it and united in it and united with it, and I was higher than the entire intellectual world and I was seeing myself as if¹⁵ I am standing within the world of the divine intellect I am was as if I was united within it and united with, as if I am standing in this supreme and divine state.¹⁶

As in R. Isaac's story, isolation and concentration precede here the ascent on high and the adherence to the highest cause, after transcending the intellectual realm. Despite the similarity between the two passages, and the availability of the Plotinian passage to Jewish thinkers since the 13th century, my point is not that of a historical direct influence on R. Isaac or on his source. I am concerned here in pointing out the difference between them; Plotin, unlike some of his followers, such as Jamblicus, was concerned with the mystical attainment, despising the acquisition of magical power. Thus, though Platonic in origin, and even Neoplatonic in its description of the ultimate trans-intellectual attainment, the story reported by R. Isaac integrates elements that may start with late Neoplatonism, which could have interpreted Plato in a magical – in their own terminology “theurgical” – manner, and thus open the Platonic discourse to a more magical interpretation, which adds a ‘practical’ sequel to the spiritual attainment. Likewise Platonic in origin is the implicit distinction that may be extracted from the story between lovers of body and lovers of wisdom. In fact, the story implies such a

15 The recommendation to imagine oneself as part of the supernal world recurs in later Hasidism, and may be influenced by Jewish sources, which adopted Plotinian views. See, e.g., R. Yehudah Albotini's *Sullam ha-'Aliyah* (ed. Y. E. Porush) (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 73.

16 R. Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Falaquera, second half of 13th century Spain, *Sefer ha-Ma'alot* (ed. L. Venetianer) (Berlin, 1894), p. 22, paraphrasing Plotin's *Enneads*, IV,6,8,1. This passage, in slightly different versions, was quoted by several Jewish authors in the Middle Ages, including R. Moshe de Leon. See P. B. Fenton (Yinon), ‘Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera and the Theology of Aristotle’, *Daat*, vol. 29 (1992), pp. 27–39. (Hebrew), esp. pp. 31–2.

development, although it attempts to move beyond it to the lover of God reminiscent of Plato.

By resorting to the term *'Ish* in the context of a relation between the male mystic to a female, the daughter of the king, R. Isaac opens the possibility of understanding the male aspect of man as pertinent also for his encounter with God, represented by a female entity, the *Shekhinah*. In fact, it is in his writings that the biblical *'Ish ha-'Elohim* is understood, following some earlier Kabbalistic traditions, as pointing to a human male in relation to a female divine. Unlike the views found in Diotima's speech and in some forms of Kabbalistic descriptions of their relation to God during the mystical experience as females, R. Isaac seems to be determined to keep with the original male gender of the mystic also during the mystical experience. Or, to put it in other words: one of the common transformations during the mystical experiences involves the feeling of male mystics that they are, or become for a while, females in relation to the supernal power encountered during the mystical experience, envisioned as male. According to a recent interpretation of Plato's theory of eros, this may also be the case in the *Symposium*.¹⁷ In Kabbalistic literature this is the case of Abraham Abulafia and I am confident that R. Isaac was acquainted with Abulafia's theories and was even influenced by them. Here, however, he followed a theosophical conceptualisation of the nature of the mystical experience. The preference of an understanding of the mystic as male during the experience is also coherent with the more powerful image that looms from the final stage of the story, where the idle man becomes a shaman.

4. WHO IS THE PRINCESS?

The second protagonist of the story, the daughter of the king, also underwent a transformation. One might well ask whether it is possible to identify the exact nature of the princess in this story. She is portrayed there exclusively as an earthly entity, but this level of understanding seems to me insufficient for understanding the story. In passage D quoted about from *Reshit Hokhmah* in the name of R. Isaac, he states that "from the sensual one must understand the nature of divine worship" all this in the context of lust for a woman. Concentration on an unfulfilled erotic desire causes the soul to leave the world of the senses, that is, the physical form of the princess, and to cling to intelligibles, and afterwards to God Himself. In his *Me'irat 'Einayim* R. Isaac of Acre writes that:

It is not like your thoughts in the objects of sensation, but it speaks of the *intelligibilia*, which are commanded by the *'atarah*. The letter *'ayin* is the initial of the

¹⁷ M. Finkelberg, 'Plato's Language of Love and the Female', *HTR*, vol. 90:3 (1997), pp. 231-61.

word *'atarah* [crown], which corresponds to the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*, which is the *Shekhinah*.¹⁸

This Kabbalist identifies, therefore, the *intelligibilia* with the *Shekhinah*. Furthermore, immediately following the passage quoted above he adds: "...see the parable of the princess, etc., as explained in *Keter Shem Tov* [by R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon]: 'the Torah [spoke here of] the unification of *'atarah*.'"¹⁹ The princess mentioned here is dealt with in R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon's book, in the context of a Talmudic parable dealing with the unification of the lower *sefirah*. It seems that by the identification of the crown as the princess, referring to the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*, which is in turn identified with the intellect, one may infer that in the parable of the princess it is plausible to find a withdrawal from the objects of sensation, a distancing from the physical form of the princess, while attachment to the Intellect is seen as cleaving to the supernal, ideal princess – the last, feminine *sefirah*, the *Shekhinah*, and then to God Himself. This clinging may stand for the "divine worship" in R. Isaac's story, and the practitioner of concentration who clings to God may stand for the "perfect servant." If the nexus between the "daughter of the king" as a symbol for the last *sefirah*, and the corporeal protagonist of the story under scrutiny here is pertinent to the way we should understand the story of the idle man, we may assume that way R. Isaac would conceptualise these two topics as pointing to an embodiment of the spiritual within the corporeal, in a manner representative of Platonic thought.

Prima facie, the sexual desire of the idle man in the opening of the parable underwent a transformation, one can even speak about a sublimation, during which the corporeal desire has been riveted to devotional spirituality and then to God. However, some details from the other writings of R. Isaac allow a more precise reading: the devotion to the intelligibles, a term betraying the Aristotelian impact, is to be understood as a devotion to the *Shekhinah*, conceived as the last divine manifestation. Indeed, there can be no doubt that this term, as well as the phrase "divine intellect" are additions to the story as learnt from an alien source; they reflect the standard terminology of R. Isaac in all his extant writings, where the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah was combined with philosophical terminology on the one side, and ecstatic elements on the other side. The occurrence of the philosophical terms, *murgashot* and *muskalot*, the ideals of *devekut*, the issue of *hitbodedut* as mental concentration, as well as the Sufi elements, like the contemplation of the beauty as a mystical technique, point to a synthesis between a philosophical approach, and Sufi and ecstatic types of mysticism.

18 R. Isaac of Acre, *Me'irat `Einayim*, (ed. Goldreich), p. 214. See also in R. Isaac's observations on R. Yehudah ibn Malkah, *Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on the Pirkey Rabbi Eli `ezer with a Hebrew Translation and Supercommentary* (ed. P. B. Fenton), where the ten *sefirot* are described in a context that assumes their transcendence of the intelligibilia.

19 R. Isaac of Acre, *Me'irat `Einayim*, (ed. Goldreich), p. 214.

Though it is possible to determine that this synthesis took place as early as the end of the 13th century, it seems that some of the texts, which reflect such an encounter, are lost, including R. Isaac's book from which R. Elijah de Vidas quoted the above parable. It is interesting to observe that this encounter, which in my opinion took place in the late 13th century in the Land of Israel,²⁰ was influential on the later 16th-century Safedian Kabbalah, which was instrumental in preserving it and transmitting it to the Hasidic masters, as we shall see below.

However, let us return to the content of R. Isaac's parable; the non-encounter with the princess has nevertheless spurred the idle man to search for the source of her beauty, or the beauty in her ultimate source, the supernal feminine; in fact, despite the fact that the idle man never fulfilled his lust, his story is not one of frustration but rather of a substitution of the material beauty for the spiritual; the encounter was purposely postponed in time by a divine providence, but was at the same time elevated to another, more 'sublime', level. However low as the starting point for such a spiritual journey may be, it is nevertheless indispensable; the lower beauty is, as R. Isaac of Acre is quoted by de Vidas as saying, in the end the stimulus for the religious search. In fact, a detailed analysis of the peculiar formulations used by this Kabbalist has shown that the princess was no less than the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence. Thus, a certain immanentistic attitude is perceptible, and this had profound implications on the way the much later Hasidic masters understood the story, as we are going to see in par. 6.

Before leaving the princess for a while, let me consider the way she is presented. According to segment B the intention of the Princess was not to educate the idle man by attracting him to a place where he will be transformed by his unfulfilled expectation, but to instruct him in matters of human hierarchy: the graveyard alone is the place where a man of humble origin becomes equal to a princess. Thus, what she had in mind was not a delay, even less an invitation, but a rejection. This 'social' reading will transform the sequel into an accidental effect of an incidental meeting. The whole story becomes a happy end, generated by a sheer misunderstanding. Such a reading will assume that the plain sense of the story is the single important one, as the princess is a corporeal lady defending her noble status by ventilating a philosophical reflection on the equalistic nature of the graveyard.

However, this 'social' reading of the story as containing the whole meaning seems to be problematic. Segment B, starting with "But" may represent a moralistic insertion, which defends the image of the princess against her apparent readiness to engage so easily an erotic offer. In fact, the erotic advance of the idle man is blamed, neither by the princess nor by the formu-

²⁰ See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 79–81. As I pointed out there, pp. 73–5, R. Nathan was influenced by Sufi thought, a point that may strengthen the possibility of a nexus between the last quote and the princess story.

lations in the sequel. On the contrary, segment D assumes that the lust of a woman is necessary for attaining the perfection of divine worship. Also the description of the female as a princess seems to be indicative of her special status: in fact, every feminine figure could fulfil the function of becoming an obsessive image of an idle man. Resorting to the appellation *Bat Melekh*, R. Isaac invites the readers of a Kabbalistic book to speculate about a special status of the mundane woman as the representative of a supernal feminine entity. Therefore, let me suggest that someone, perhaps even R. Isaac himself, inserted segment B in order to allow a double reading to the story: on the plain level it is a matter of human hierarchy that imposes on the audacious idle man an even more marginal status than before. On another level, his lust induced him into an adventure that has its own logic, because it has been premeditated: the princess is no other than the *Shekhinah*, whose advice is both a rejection and an invitation. After all, as suggested above, he did meet the spiritual counterpart of the princess. This double reading of a non-biblical story, which R. Isaac adopted from a non-Jewish source, is not unique but can also be demonstrated in another, similar, instance.

Let me insist for a moment on the possibility of reading the story as involving a meeting with the spiritual princess at the end. The mundane interpretation claims that only in the graveyard are all things equal, all this as an answer for the idle man's erotic advance that remained corporeally unfulfilled. However, if the term *'Ish 'Elohim* is understood as pointing, as it did in other sources, to the husband of the *Shekhinah*, this erotic meeting was nevertheless fulfilled. Moreover, the resort to the ideal of *devekut* assumes a cleaving or adherence, an experience that implies an equation between the two elements that entered this encounter. In other words, the *Shekhinah* invited the idle man to the cemetery when embodied in a princess, and is now visited by the intellect of the ascetic that ascends to her spiritual realm. An immanentistic view of the *Shekhinah* as embodied within the princess, is a trigger for the mental ascent to God.

Last, but not least: why meet in a cemetery? The social answer apparently solves the quandary. If we nevertheless stick to a spiritual interpretation, which assumes a certain premeditation conducive to a mystical experience, this answer is not sufficient. Is it possible to relate the cemetery to the spiritual development undergone by the idle man? I would like to suggest the possibility of an affinity between the spiritual renascence of the idle man, and his being invited to the graveyard. According to many religious traditions, widespread in late antiquity Hellenistic sources, in Christianity and Judaism, the theme of the burial is both a symbol and part of a process of spiritual transformation and Dov Sdan and Morton Smith have analysed these themes in detail.²¹ Indeed, the idle man does not die; neither do many

²¹ See, respectively, 'Hittah she-niqberah', *Proceedings of the Israeli National Academy for Sciences*, vol. I (1964), pp. 1-21 (Hebrew) and 'Transformation by Burial (I Cor. 15.35-49; Rom 6.3-5 and 8.9-11)', *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 52 (1983), pp. 87-112.

of the mystics undergoing the symbolic burial in order to be regenerated. However, his becoming part of the cemetery scene for a long period is quite evident and this fact invites the possibility, though certainly not the certainty, that this nexus and burial and rebirth may be the reason for the selection of the cemetery as the scene for a story emphasising a spiritual renaissance. One last remark on the cemetery: according to Jewish tradition this is not a very salient place for reaching a mystical experience of the divine, neither to perform miracles nor bless people. The very occurrence of this theme fosters the thesis of an alien source.

5. SOME POSSIBLE GREEK SOURCES

I have addressed the possible manner in which R. Isaac of Acre could explain this passage to another Kabbalist. It is doubtful that he was aware of its original Platonic source, or if he would have cared about it. Plato was, according to a passage he quotes as received as a tradition, an ambiguous figure, which is much better than the totally wrong Aristotle:

A fallacious proof ... as the proof adduced by Plato, in order to demonstrate his opposition to the tradition [Kabbalah] of the prophet Jeremiah, blessed be his memory, which was a complete lie; this was acknowledged by Plato [himself] as he revealed in a dream to his disciple, after his death, as I have written in the book *Divrei ha-Yamim* and in the book *Hayyim de-'Orayta*.²²

However, what seems to me important from our point of view, viz. religious transformations, is the behaviour of the Princess. A person of lower origin who makes erotic advances approaches her and she is, if my assumption that segment B is an interpolation, accepting them. The outcome, different indeed, does not solve the quandary of what type of figure looms from the attitude she expressed in the first encounter. In my opinion, the corporeal princess is close to the figure of the Muse Polyhymnia, presented in Plato's *Symposium* 187d–e as embodying the *Eros Pandemos*, the source of the earthy, corporeal love. Unlike the celestial, or the Uranian eros, which is, in fact, the gist of R. Isaac's story, Polyhymnia is a prostitute of superhuman nature. Unlike the Platonic dichotomy between these two diverging forms of love, R. Isaac, or his source, envisioned the lower, following nevertheless to a certain extent Plato's thought, as the representative of the higher. Material love is a manner of inciting the later and more sublime attachment to the spiritual, which cannot otherwise be attained. The transcendental Urania needs the mundane Polyhymnia in order to be loved by mortals.

²² *Sefer 'Otzar Hayyim*, Ms. Moscow-Guenzburg 775, fol. 22a. Unfortunately, these two books of R. Isaac of Acre seem to be lost. R. Isaac claims that he heard the story from the mouth of R. David ha-Kohen, a Kabbalist and leader of Toledan Jewry in the second half of the 13th century, who, in his turn, heard it from his teacher, R. Moses ben Nahman, the famous Nahmanides.

There are reasons to believe that this parable reached R. Isaac of Acre from a Sufi source.²³ Originally, it seems, however, that the parable of the princess and Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium* 210–212 are related. Nevertheless in her famous speech Diotima does not mention solitude at all, either in the sense of seclusion from society or in that of mental concentration. The Greek ideals of contemplation, in both their Platonic and Aristotelian versions, are less concerned with specific techniques, or with shamanic attainments that would complement the contemplative achievements though shamanic elements were known in ancient Greece.²⁴ Thus, a transformation of the story took place either in a Sufi hypothetical version or in R. Isaac's rendition of a more Platonic version.

Nevertheless, some forms of solitude are mentioned by the Muslim philosopher Averroes (1126–1198) in connection with Socrates' understanding of God:

And he who among them belong to the unique individuals, like Socrates, who chose isolation and separation from other people and retreat into their souls always, until those of great heart believed that through this dedication and forced contemplation of the above-mentioned forms, one shall arrive at the first form that can be apprehended.²⁵

Here, as in the parable of the princess, it is possible to ascend from the intelligibles, or the forms, to the apprehension of God Himself, by means of solitude and mental concentration. Is the practice of solitude attributed to Socrates because he was the one to quote Diotima's comment in Plato's dialogue? In any event, Averroes' comment seems to reflect an even earlier tradition depicting Socrates as a recluse, already cited by R. Yehudah ha-Levi. It is interesting to note that there is a tradition in R. Moses Narboni's *Commentary to Sefer Hai Ben Yoqtan*, according to which:

the later ones blamed the pious one Socrates for bringing himself to lack of holiness because the difference between elitist study and the study of the masses was not clear to him. And I refer to the practitioner of *hitbodedut* from the polis, and the wholeness of his nature that he not take to his soul that which God and the prophets did not do, in making the fool and the wise man equal.²⁶

Socrates is portrayed here as one who did not understand the difference between the nature of the contemplation of the wise man and that of the masses, a misunderstanding that costs him his life. It seems that this critique

²³ See P. Fenton, *Ovadia et David Maimonide, Deux traites de mystique juive* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1987), p. 104 note 218, who adduced important parallels between part D of the quote from R. Isaac about the importance of the corporeal love, and Sufi material.

²⁴ See I. P. Couliano, *Experiences de l'extase* (Paris: Payot, 1984), pp. 25–43.

²⁵ R. Joseph Ben Shem Tov, *Commentary to Averroes' Iggeret ha-Devequt (Epistula de Coniunctione)*, Ms. Berlin 216 (Or. Qu. 681), p. 325. I could not find a parallel to this statement in I. Alon's monograph *Socrates in Mediaeval Arabic Literature* (Brill, Leiden, Jerusalem, 1991).

²⁶ Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1351, fol. 125ab.

is made from a Platonic perspective, which emphasised the importance of esotericism.

Thus, a mystical device that will become part and parcel of ecstatic Kabbalah, had been attributed to Socrates independently of Jewish mystical sources, and it is this practice in particular that is incorporated in the idle man's story. Socrates, like the idle man, isolated himself from the city.

6. CONTEMPLATING WOMEN IN 18TH-CENTURY POLISH HASIDISM

A transformation that is both induced and represented by the idle man story is that of ideals in a late development in Jewish culture: Polish Hasidism of the 18th century. The above story represents, as already indicated, an appropriation of a narrative from an alien source. This is by no means new in medieval Jewish and non-Jewish literature, which is replete with stories taken from Hindu, Arabic and Christian sources. What, however, becomes clear from R. Isaac's story under scrutiny is that it introduced a new ideal, which can be achieved by resorting to what I shall call anomian techniques.²⁷ By this term I mean that neither study of the Torah or of the Talmud nor the performance of the commandments are mentioned or even implied in the story itself. Instead, we learn about a state of separation from society, mental concentration, spiritual separation from sensibilia, and contemplation, which are even more peculiar if we remember that they are concerned with a fixation of thought on the image of a woman. A perusal of the text of the story does not even allow the possibility of identifying the idle man, or his avatar into a saintly figure, with a Jew. Apparently this was not even the intention of R. Isaac, and this fact indicates, in my opinion, the alien source of the story. Thus, by resorting to anomian techniques a non-Jewish idler may become, according to the view of two important Kabbalists, a religiously ideal figure.

Since the story had been preserved in a broad ethical treatise we may assume that it had been widely circulated and had therefore influenced Hasidism, as noted above. Indeed, this revivalist movement moved away from the classical ideals of study of the Torah and recommended more emotional forms of worship, gravitating around devotion, enthusiasm, union and communion with God. This shift in the centre of gravitation of Jewish culture in some parts of Eastern Europe is quite a significant one, but I cannot enter here into a discussion of its possible reasons.

However, as the development and the appropriation of this story show, the emergence of spiritual ideals that draw attention away from learning, was not new to the Hasidic masters. It would be disproportionate or perhaps

²⁷ I use the term 'anomian' in order to distinguish between the nomian, namely Halakhic rituals, on the one hand, and the anti-nomian behavior, intended to subvert the status of Halakhah. Therefore, anomian points to indifference to the details of the common ritual practice.

even ridiculous to attribute the dramatic shift characteristic of Hasidic mysticism and of it as a movement to a single story. Moreover, one could argue that the story is to be understood as a proof-text for Hasidic ideals rather than as a springboard for such ideals. Nevertheless, in a culture like Rabbinic and post-Rabbinic Judaism that is so eager to find proof-texts, the availability of an appropriate proof-text is very helpful for a master striving to promote new ideals.

Moreover, I would be less sceptical about attributing the use of the story to its role as proof-text. The masters who initiated the shift toward a more popular ideal, emphasising the importance or at least the possibility of the uninformed attaining a more sublime religious experience, did not start in a vacuum. They were consumers of ethical literature like de Vidas' *Reshit Hokhmah* before they become leaders of a new movement. I assume that this story, and other similar to them that cannot be discussed here, somehow prepared the ground and inspired the masters who initiated Hasidism, and as such they were among the springboards that later on became proof-texts as well. Thus, the religious transformation of the idle man represents a micro-change that was among several factors inspiring and fostering a much greater social religious change.

The name of R. Isaac is only rarely mentioned in the Hasidic writings that were influenced by this parable. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt as to its influence. The impact of this parable on R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy and other Hasidic masters has been already noted by Mendel Piekarz,²⁸ Mordekhai Pachter²⁹, Ze'ev Gries³⁰ and in Amos Goldreich's important remark.³¹ Indeed, R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy explicitly mentions his source, "[R. Isaac] of Acre" in a context that may be interpreted as if the Besht himself concurs to the view of the ecstatic Kabbalist.

There is an aspect of blessing and curse not from the side of a revenge because he had rebelled against the king but solely from the aspect of his not being in union with the innerness of the Torah and the commandments but by the intermediary of the adorned woman with the pertinent issues, for each and every one of Israel according to his aspect and desire as it is written in the name of my teacher³² in the pericope *Re'eh*, see there, and it seems that it concerns another issue as it is written in *R[eshit] H[okhmah]* the gate of love chapter 4 on the account of DeMin Acco, that out of the desire of the lust of women he was separated from the corporeality and turned to unite with the intelligibilia because of that separation, so that he united himself to Him blessed be He. See there and she

28 M. Piekarz, *The Beginning of Hasidism - Ideological Trends in Derush and Musar Literature* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1978), pp. 208-9, 234 (Hebrew). It should be noted that the trace of the above passage is conspicuous also in an additional early Hasidic text, quoted in R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Tzafnat Pa'aneah*, fol. 49a. See Piekarz, *The Beginning of Hasidism*, p. 261.

29 Pachter, 'The Traces of the Influence', pp. 576-7.

30 See Z. Gries, *Conduct Literature (Regimen Vitae). Its History and Place in the Life of the Beshtian Hasidism* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1989), pp. 206-7 (Hebrew).

31 *Me'irat Einayim* (ed. A. Goldreich), pp. 399-400.

32 Namely R. Israel ben Eliezer, Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of 18th-century Hasidism.

is she.³³ Because of it, it will be understood that the arrival of the blessing and the curse to you namely the blessing being the lust of this world He will give him from the aspect of the above mentioned adorned woman, because his soul did not yet desire the *intelligibilia*. And then the curse is coming, namely the lust has been taken away from each one according to the aspect of his desiring her, so that he will desire to this so much that he will divest from the corporeality out of his desire for this... and after he had separated from his corporeality out of his desire for this matter...then you should transform and intelligise the *intelligibilia* and this is the meaning of what is written: "And thou shall return to the Lord thy God" by means of the same desire to which you had been accustomed through the time that you had been removed from God...and you will no more desire anything corporeal, which is the adorned woman, by means of the lust of this world but you soul will desire Him, blessed be He.³⁴

Especially interesting is the fact that the Besht is reported to have described the protagonist of R. Isaac's story as "Hasid 'Olam" a syntagm that may be understood as a Pious of the entire world. The very resort to the term Hasid, a term that is not found in R. Isaac's story or in its immediate context, represents the transformation of the recluse into a paragon of 18th-century Hasidism.

However, beyond the direct quotations, which show how the anomian way of life of the solitary sage brought him to the highest religious attainment, Hasidic masters developed the attitude adopted from R. Isaac into a directive for their own life. According to a tradition found in a book of a late 18th-century Hasidic author, R. Aharon Kohen of Apta:

The righteous is able to apprehend the incense, which is the holiness and the Being, the presence and the *Ruhaniyut*³⁵ which maintain everything. In every place that he looks, he sees only the divine and the Being, even etc.³⁶

In my opinion, the word "etc." found in the text stands for the contemplation of a woman, who can be conceived as enveloping the divinity, the

33 This formula as designating a mystical union is found in Jewish philosophers and ecstatic Kabbalists in the 13th century. It stems, presumably, from Sufi sources.

34 R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy, *Toledot Ya`aqov Yosef* (Koretz, 1780), fol. 45b. See also his *Tzafnat Pa' aneah* (New York, 1976), fols. 49a, 83ab and *Ben Porat Yosef* (Pietrkov, 1884), fol. 21ab. This explicit awareness of the founders of Hasidism as to the Kabbalistic source of an immanentist view should have been taken into consideration when R. Elior, 'Spiritual Renaissance and Social Change in the Beginnings of Hasidism', in `Aleï Shefer, *Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexandre Safran*, ed. M. Hallamish (Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990), pp. 35-9 (Hebrew), claims that Hasidism has introduced a far-reaching transformation of Kabbalistic concepts, and adduces as her major example the concept of the discovering the divine within this world. Likewise, I. Tishby, 'The Messianic Idea and Messianic Trends in the Growth of Hasidism', *Zion*, vol. XXXII (1967), p. 27, note 122 mentions the theme of tracing the beauty of a beautiful woman to its supernal source in R. Barukh of Kossov, *Yesod ha-Emunah* (Chernovitz, 1864), fol. 100a, as the view of the Great Maggid, without being aware either of the discussions of R. Jacob Joseph of Polonoy or of R. Isaac of Acre.

35 Namely the spirituality that sometimes represents a form of divine immanence.

36 R. Aharon Kohen of Apta, *Or ha-Ganuz le-Tzaddiqim* (Zolkovie, 1800), fol. 9b.

presence and the spiritual force. The immanence of the spiritual force in man and in the world is here as obvious as that of other terms like divine presence and *hiyyut* – namely vitality – in other contexts. Elsewhere, in the same book we learn that:

The intention of Sarah in all her adornments and embellishments only for the sake of heaven, as someone who embellishes the image of the King. Namely there is a connection between the supernal vitality, which is a spark of the *Shekhinah* and man. Therefore, if someone is adorning himself, he does so in order to hint at the adornment of the *Shekhinah* and his beauty is from the splendour of the *Shekhinah*. So also he must think of the case where someone sees a beautiful and adorned person. [He must think] that this person is in the image of God, and he shall think that he sees the beauty and the adornment of the image of the King. And this was the intention of Sarah when she embellished herself.³⁷ Namely, as it is said³⁸: “Go out and see, daughters of Zion”, namely go out of your corporeality and see the *Ruhaniyut* of a thing, since the corporeality of a certain thing is only a sign [*Tziyun*] and a hint of the supernal Beauty. Here, a spark of beauty out of the beauty of the world of *Tiferet* is dwelling below. And it is incumbent to reflect [*Iekhavven*] that this beauty is annihilated [*battel*] as a candle at noon, in comparison to the supernal beauty and splendour.³⁹

What should concern us in the framework of this discussion is the fact that the moderate immanentist theory of R. Isaac of Acre was developed in Hasidic discussions, which emphasised contemplation of the beauty of the woman as a means of reaching out to the supernal source of beauty. Second, and even more important from our vantage-point, is the assumption that the synthesis between the ecstatic Kabbalah and philosophical terminology, represented by the use of the term ‘intelligibles’ was accepted by R. Jacob Joseph in his elaboration on R. Isaac’s story. Thus, in addition to their mystical linguistic features, the ecstatic descriptions occasionally adopted philosophical terminologies, a fact that adds another dimension to the phenomenological affinities between Hasidism and the ecstatic Kabbalah.⁴⁰

Especially interesting in this context is a lengthy passage of R. Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir, one of the followers of the Great Maggid, where three different attitudes to the beauty of women are described. The first revolves around a biographical incident of the Great Maggid, consisting of a rather conservative repulsion of feminine beauty, activated by an intellectualistic

³⁷ On the embellishments of the woman that is the Torah according to the Besht in the passage from *Toledot Ya`aqov Yosef*, fol. 45b, which deals with R. Isaac’s story.

³⁸ *Song of Songs* 3:11.

³⁹ R. Aharon Kohen of Apta, ‘*Or ha-Ganuz le-Tzaddiqim*, fol. 10b; for the source of his view see R. Dov Beer of Medzhiretch, *Sefer Maggid Devarav le-Ya`aqov* (ed. R. Schatz-Uffenheimer) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1976), pp. 29–30; see also R. Ze’ev Wolf of Zhitomir, ‘*Or ha-Me’ir* (New York, 1954), fols. 11c–12a.

⁴⁰ For another instance of reverberation of a legend found in ecstatic Kabbalah, again R. Isaac of Acre, in Polish Hasidism, see M. Idel, ‘Enoch, the Mystical Cobbler’, *Kabbalah*, vol. 5 (2000), pp. 265–86 (Hebrew).

retracing of the origin of that beauty to the low corporeal elements. The younger Maggid retraces the source of female beauty to the aggregation of the coarse, corporeal components and an awareness of this ultimate source transforms the attraction to a woman into repulsion. This type of reaction relates to the earlier part of the Great Maggid's life when he was a teacher in a village, and it is characteristic of the more ascetic trends in Kabbalah. The other one, however, is more in vein with the view of R. Isaac of Acre and de Vidas, a view that traces the source of beauty to the *Shekhinah*, called "the most beautiful of all the women, the image of all the images that are reflected in Her." Beauty is to be elevated to its source and a beautiful woman reflects the splendour of the divine presence here below. The third one assumes that the elevation of the beauty to its source causes pleasure to God, an approach that can be understood as theurgy.⁴¹

It is important to recall that the assumption that it is possible to find spiritual elements within the material realm was conceived as a technique in Cordovero. Therefore, the immanentist views of the Hasidic masters, who discovered God in this world, should not surprise someone acquainted with the thought of this Safedian Kabbalist and that of his students. It is particularly important to mention that Cordovero's recommendation is related in that text, like in Hasidism, to the notion of *devekut*. Moreover, an important shift in the ideals of Hasidism in comparison to an earlier form of Kabbalah, the Lurianic one, should be mentioned. Luria and his followers were ascetically oriented, and they had a rather significant impact on Jewish mystics later on, but this attitude was attenuated in Hasidism, as we shall see below.

Let me address now the macro-change that affected the behaviour of some Hasidim, which is part of a restructuring of Jewish culture in some circles in Eastern Europe. In one of the most vicious critiques against Hasidim, authored by R. David of Makow, they are accused of looking to women in the market and elevating their thought to God:

They walk as idle persons and talk vain talks saying that whoever walks in the market and gazes at women, elevates his thought to God, Blessed be His Name, and thus he worships God.⁴²

Here, no literary hints at R. Isaac's story are to be found; mysticism becomes an ethos, one concerned with eros, but an ethos nevertheless. In another famous polemical treatise of the same R. David of Makow, we find an interesting passage, attributed to a Hasidic figure, a certain R. Leib Melammed.

⁴¹ See R. Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir, '*Or ha-Me'ir*', fol. 16cd. More on this issue, in the context of a broader analysis of R. Ze'ev Wolf's passage see M. Idel, 'Feminine Beauty – A Chapter in the History of Jewish Mysticism', *Within Hasidic Circles, Studies in Hasidism in Memory of Mordecai Wilensky*, ed. I. Etkes, D. Assaf, I. Bartal and E. Reiner (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1999), pp. 317–33 (Hebrew).

⁴² Cf. R. David of Makow, in *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, ed. M. Wilensky (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1970), vol. II, p. 235.

However, very serious doubts has been cast on the authenticity of this passage, which scholars consider to be either a text forged by an opponent to Hasidism or possibly one written by a Frankist:

Once I was alone with a woman and she was lying on a made bed, naked without a shirt. And she asked me to “be with her,” and this is sufficient for someone who understands. But I did not heed her words and I only contemplated her flesh and her great beauty until a great holiness came upon me and told me to desist. Therefore, it is proper for a man when he sees a woman to have great desire for her, but nevertheless not to have actually an intercourse with her, but rather to contemplate her and look at her intensely and he will pass the test and rise to a great rank.⁴³

In a manner reminiscent of the early 13th-century Hasidei Ashkenaz, there is the possibility of withstanding the erotic ordeal and of transforming it into a religious attainment. However, what is new in the late Hasidism, is the assumption, which I suggest is derived from R. Isaac’s story, that the beauty of a woman may become the trigger for ascending to the divine realm.

Prima facie, R. Isaac’s story could only reinforce a propensity for asceticism: the idle man becomes, in fact, an ascetic, and this transformation was crucial for his religious attainment. However, the way in which de Vidas understood the story should be taken into consideration in this context. After quoting R. Isaac’s story, the Safedian Kabbalist wrote:

From this story we should learn that whoever will desire the Torah so much that he will think, day and night, only about her and not about any of the things of this world, he will attain a wondrous degree in his soul, and will not resort to ascetic practices and fasts, because the union depends only on the desire of the Torah and its love, so as he will desire it as the desire of his beloved.⁴⁴

De Vidas recommends, therefore, the classical Jewish value of a love of the Torah, which renders the ascetic path superfluous. By doing so he may, indeed, move away from the original message of R. Isaac’s story but is, nevertheless, closer to the gist of the Platonic source, as Diotima classifies the love of knowledge and learning as higher than that of a beautiful body. Moreover, according to de Vidas, the intense love as described in the story should be directed to God himself, and he adduced the story only in order to illustrate the possibility of an absolute dedication, which should, *a fortiori*, be directed to God. The Besht addressed the idle man story as part of

⁴³ See *Shever Poshe`yim*, in *Hasidim and Mitnaggedim*, ed. Wilensky, vol. II, p. 115; see also D. Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (Basic Books, 1992), p. 126.

⁴⁴ *Reshit Hokhmah*, Gate of Love, ch. 3, p. 426; see also p. 425. For the feminine symbolism of the Torah in Jewish mysticism see M. Idel, ‘The Concept of the Torah in Heikhalot Literature and its Metamorphoses’, *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, vol. I (1981), pp. 41–2 (Hebrew); E. R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square, Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 1–29; B. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 145–6, 253, 256, 276–7, 302, 312, 338. For eros and Torah in general see S. Moses, *Eros et la loi, Lectures Bibliques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999), pp. 65–76.

a more traditional spiritual development, when he described the woman mentioned in the story as the Torah in this word, as having garments that fit each and every one of Israel, who become in such a way attracted to the higher mystical attainment of union with God. By doing so, the Besht addressed the story as it has been embedded in its context in de Vidas' book, and we may assume that he knew also the non-ascetic aspect mentioned above. In other words, an anomian story was preserved in Safed and adapted in Poland only because it was embedded within a nomian context, which exploited an *a fortiori* argument in order to reinforce one of the standard mystical paths in Jewish mysticism, the study of the Torah. In any case, de Vidas' marginalisation of asceticism in the above passage may be conceived as a plausible and significant source for, or at least antecedent of, the marginalisation of ascetic Lurianic practices in Hasidism.

However, the awareness of the metamorphosis of an originally Platonic type of eros in Hasidism may account for the somewhat less particularistic attitude implicit in the Kabbalistic and Hasidic discussions: it is not only the beauty of a Jewish woman that may serve as the starting point of the ascending process of contemplation, but women in general, and according to some of the discussions, perhaps gentile women. I assume that this is a modest contribution from Greek philosophy, a more universalistic approach, which was still inspiring the 18th-century Hasidic masters. However, we shall also pay attention to the Hasidic propensity to panentheism as an additional factor urging the discovery of a divine presence in so many and diverse places.

If the above analysis is correct the last significant transformation of Platonism in Europe is, perhaps, not represented by the Cambridge Platonists in the mid-17th century but by the 18th-century humble Hasidim who were searching for beautiful women in Polish markets in order to elevate their thoughts to God. As good Platonists they loved the image of the idea within the women they contemplated. In fact, the Hasidic masters inherited a very ancient theory; The Platonic discussion on the nature of love adapted, as noted by several scholars, the terminology of Greek mysteries, especially the Eleusian ones.⁴⁵ Then, Diotima's speech about a vertical contemplative ascent, shaped by the mystery terminology, travelled a long horizontal way: it was apparently adopted by Muslim Sufis, from whom R. Isaac of Acre might have adduced it when he met them somewhere in the Galilee. He took it from Asia to Western Europe, but his book made its way back to the Middle East and this story was preserved in Safed and from there it reached Eastern Europe. Indeed, this trajectory is representative of the way many topics in Hasidism should be understood in general, and it constitutes but a small observation enforcing Alfred Whitehead's remark that Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato. The above analysis has added just one more small footnote to his observation.

⁴⁵ See M. Morgan, *Platonic Piety, Philosophy & Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 97-9; Finkelberg, 'Plato's Language', p. 241.